

How Might Joe Biden as President Deal with Korea?

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By Robert R. King

In 2001, Senator Joe Biden became Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. At the time, I was Chief of Staff for Congressman Tom Lantos of California, who had just become Ranking Democratic Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee earlier that same year. Before Lantos' election to Congress, he had spent a few years in the late 1970s as a senior foreign policy advisor to Biden, and the two of them had become close friends. They had traveled together internationally on many occasions, and after 1981 when both were serving in Congress, they worked together on a number of international projects.

Lantos set up a meeting in 2001 to talk with Biden about how the two might work together on a number of fractious foreign affairs issues since both were the leading Democrats of the foreign policy committees of the House and the Senate. We met in Biden's personal office in the Russel Senate Office Building, and as Democratic Staff Director Lantos invited me to join the meeting with Biden and his committee chief of staff.

We arrived just as Biden got back from a vote in the Senate chamber, and we were together for an hour or so before Lantos had to hurry back for a vote in the House of Representatives. The meeting began with Biden discussing in great detail the previous evening's episode of *The West Wing*—the American serial political drama (1999-2006) which was widely praised by critics, political science professors, former White House staffers, and which received 26 Prime Time Emmy awards including four awards for Outstanding Drama Series.

Biden was deeply into the issues raised in that television episode. He had been a presidential candidate for a time during the 1988 campaign, and he was known to have presidential ambitions. After hearing his analysis of *The West Wing* it was clear to me that he was still interested. Biden's interest in *The West Wing* episode focused on two issues: how do you define what is the right decision on a public policy issue and how carry it out within a democratic system that requires approval of a fractious Congress and everything is done in the media spotlight. His analysis convinced me he understood the political process and he had the right values.

With Joe Biden now President-elect Biden, pundits and astrologers are beginning the parlor game "What will President Biden do about _____ [insert your favorite issue]." Unlike the election of Donald Trump four years ago, we have a much better idea of what Biden is likely

to do. He has a long track record in the realm of public policy, while Trump's previous experience was limited to being a reality television personality and selling his name on properties whose mortgages were held by Russian oligarchs and Saudi princes.

Biden was a United States Senator for 36 years, and he was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for that time. He was chair of the committee for 3½ years and its Ranking Democratic Member for 8½ years. Most recently he served 8 years as Vice President, where he was involved in the highest level discussions, particularly on foreign affairs. The principal reason Biden was chosen to be President Obama's running mate in 2008 was his foreign policy experience, which Obama lacked.

What could we expect President-elect Biden to do with regard to policy on Korea when he moves into the Oval Office? What might be different than what we have seen over the last four years?

Likely Policies toward South Korea

Biden gave a "Special contribution" to Yonhap, a principal South Korean news agency, that provides some indication of the President-elect's thoughts on Korea policy. The piece entitled "Hope for Our Better Future" was principally focused on issues that Korean-Americans would be most concerned about—immigration to the United States, the failure of President Trump to deal with the Covid pandemic, and economic recovery. He also emphasized the South Korean and United States cooperation and sacrifice in the Korean War.

A couple of sentences were particularly forward-looking: "As President, I'll stand with South Korea, strengthening our alliance to safeguard peace in East Asia and beyond, rather than extorting Seoul with reckless threats to remove our troops. I'll engage in principled diplomacy and keep pressing toward a denuclearized North Korea and a unified Korean Peninsula, while working to reunite Korean Americans separated from loved ones in North Korea for decades."

Biden has been a particularly vocal advocate of United States allies, and he has supported international cooperation to deal with common international problems. Trump, on the other hand, has disengaged with the international community. It is been not just "America first," but America alone. Trump has demanded that South Korea (and Japan) pay considerably more to maintain U.S. troops there, and his belligerent pressure tactics reflect his background as a brash real estate mogul rather than a diplomatic approach to a common national security problem for both the U.S. and South Korea. This is very much like pulling out of the World Health Organization and defaulting on a \$62 million obligation to the UN agency in the midst of an international pandemic.

United States relations with South Korea are impacted by the U.S.-China relationship, and even under Biden there are likely to be issues that will require diplomatic effort to navigate. Biden, however, will be more sophisticated in diplomacy. Trump thinks in terms of his real estate tycoon Art of the Deal mentality, whereas Biden understands the importance of careful diplomatic negotiation.

Likely Policies Toward North Korea

Look for less focus on summit meetings with the North Korean leader from President Biden. In less than two years President Trump has met three times with North Korea's Kim Jong-un. Despite international media frenzy for all three meetings, the President has little to show for his effort. The Singapore summit (June 2018) received international attention, the United States received 55 sets of remains, some of which may be U.S. military servicemen. The Hanoi summit (February 2019) ended abruptly and before final meetings were held with recriminations for the failure. The third meeting was a hand-shake at the DMZ border with nothing of substance accomplished.

The principal reason for the failure of the meetings was that senior staff were not given the mandate to pull together agreements that both sides were willing to accept. The two leaders exchanged "beautiful letters," "love letters," but nothing of substance resulted. As one Biden advisor said "There's no question that the era of love letters will be over." Look for Biden to meet with Kim only if a meeting has been thoroughly prepared in advance. A photo op will not be enough to justify a meeting with the President of the United States.

North Korea seems to have missed the possibility that Vice President Biden might become the U.S. President, because they have been especially negative in name calling the United States' new leader. A year ago in November 2019, the North Korean news agency KCNA was particularly critical of Joe Biden, then one of several Democratic candidates for President. (Keep in mind that in North Korea KCNA is the official voice of the government—the equivalent of the White House spokesperson, not something like The Washington Post or CNN expressing a point of view.)

Biden was repeatedly called a dog—"a rabid dog only keen on getting at other's throats. . . . wandering about like a starving field dog. . . . No wonder, even the Americans call him '1% Biden' with low I.Q. . . . 'mad Biden'" He "had the temerity to dare slander the dignity of the supreme leadership of the DPRK," and this "was the last-ditch efforts of the rabid dog expecting his death."

The era of "love letters" with North Korea may be over, but that does not mean that the United States will end its efforts to engage North Korea and reach a deal on denuclearization. But it will take a different approach, one that is less personal and more professional. A more professional approach to North Korea and a focus on restoring trust in the U.S.-Korea alliance are two key changes that we should expect from President-elect Biden.

Robert R. King is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America. He is former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights. The views expressed here are his own.

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